



Middle Grades Spotlight

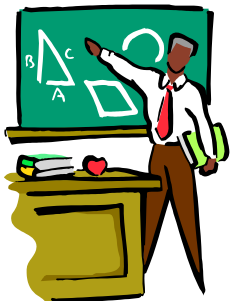
A Newsletter for California's Middle Grades Educator

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Winter–Spring 2004

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A Message from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction

Balancing the academic and emotional needs of our middle grades students is a difficult task. As a parent I understand the challenges of raising a youngster through the changes of adolescence, so I am especially appreciative of the fine work that our middle grade teachers and administrators do every day. I am pleased that this issue of the *Middle Grades Spotlight* includes examples of six middle grade schools whose success stories reflect the positive energy in our schools.

While California has been developing its own middle grade initiatives, such as Schools To Watch—Taking Center Stage, companion work has been created nationally. Over the last two years, the National Middle School Association (whose largest affiliate is the California League of Middle Schools) convened panels of researchers and school practitioners to review the existing research on middle-level education. A comprehensive policy document, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents*, emerged that reflects professional consensus about the best educational practices for middle-level education. *This We Believe* articulates 14 research-based principles that underpin high-quality, student-centered middle grades education.

In this newsletter, six California schools tell their own stories about the way in which some of these principles are implemented on their campuses and in their classrooms. I am sure that after you read these articles, you will agree that California has reason to be proud of these schools. I hope that you find their stories interesting.

JACK O'CONNELL

This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents

The National Middle School Association believes successful schools for young adolescents are characterized by a culture that includes

- **Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so.** Effective middle level educators understand the developmental uniqueness of the age group, the curriculum they teach, and effective learning and assessment strategies. They need specific teacher preparation before entering the classroom and continuous professional development as they pursue their careers.

- **Courageous, collaborative leadership.** Middle level leaders understand adolescents, the society, and the theory and practice of middle level education. As the prime determiner of the school culture, the principal influences student achievement and teacher effectiveness by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining an effective instructional program.

- **A shared vision that guides decisions.** All decisions made about the school should be guided by a shared vision and the mission statement derived from it.

- **An inviting, supportive, and safe environment.** A successful school is an inviting, supportive, and safe place, a joyful community that promotes in-depth learning and enhances students' physical and emotional well-being. In such a school, human relationships are paramount.

- **High expectations for every member of the learning community.** Educators and students hold themselves and each other to high expectations. Such confidence promotes positive attitudes and behaviors and motivates students to tackle challenging learning activities. Successful schools recognize that young adolescents are capable of far more than adults often assume.

(Continued on page 3)

How Six California Schools Meet the Characteristics of *This We Believe*

California educators have long believed that the best way to ensure that students in middle school succeed is to create a school culture that supports young adolescents socially, emotionally, and academically. Over the last two decades, numerous state and national publications have expanded on the essential middle school philosophy first espoused by the National Middle School Association (NMSA) in its publication, *This We Believe* (1982).

In the fall of 2003, the NMSA released a revised version of *This We Believe* and a companion document titled *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe*. These publications were developed from two years of exhaustive review of current research that involved over 250 researchers and middle school practitioners. Since the publication of *This We Believe* with its 14 characteristics of successful middle schools, the document has been endorsed by other national professional organizations, including the Association for Curriculum Development, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the National Educational Association. More information is available on the Web at http://www.nmsa.org/news/Executive_Sum.pdf.

The *Middle Grades Spotlight* editors invited several California middle schools—many of which are members of the California Middle Grade Partnership Network—to respond to the 14 characteristics of successful middle schools outlined in *This We Believe*. Six of their responses are spotlighted in this issue.

California's Middle School Reform Efforts

When the first edition of *This We Believe* was published in 1982, the California Department of Education (CDE) responded with *Caught in the Middle: Educational Reform for Young Adolescents in California Public Schools* (1987). The Carnegie Foundation published its first report two years later,

(Continued from page 2)

●**Students and teachers engaged in active learning.** The most successful learning strategies are ones that involve each student personally. When students routinely assume the role of teacher, and teachers demonstrate that they are still learners, a genuine learning community is present.

●**An adult advocate for every student.** Academic success and personal growth increase markedly when young adolescents' affective needs are met. All adults in successful middle level schools are advocates, advisors, and mentors.

●**School-initiated family and community partnerships.** Successful middle schools promote family involvement and take the initiative to develop needed home-school bonds. The involvement of family is linked to higher levels of student achievement and improved student behavior.

Therefore, successful schools for young adolescents provide

●**Curriculum that is relevant, challenging, integrative, and exploratory.** An effective curriculum is based on criteria of high quality and includes learning activities that create opportunities for students to pose and answer questions that are important to them. Such a curriculum provides direction for what young adolescents should know and be able to do and helps them achieve the attitudes and behaviors needed for a full, productive, and satisfying life.

●**Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity.** Since young adolescents learn best through engagement and interaction, learning strategies involve students in dialogue with teachers and with one another. Teaching approaches should enhance and accommodate the diverse skills, abilities, and prior knowledge of young adolescents, and draw upon students' individual learning styles.

(Continued on page 4)

Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century (1989).

In the mid to late 1990s, standards, assessment, and school accountability changed the educational landscape of California. The CDE responded to the changing times with 16 recommendations from the Superintendent's Middle Grades Task Force in 1998. The 16 recommendations may be viewed on the Web at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/g/mg/recommendations.asp>.

These recommendations became the introduction to a new CDE publication, *Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California's Middle Grades Students* in 2001. *Taking Center Stage* combined beliefs from *This We Believe*, *Turning Points*, an updated *Turning Points* (2000), and CDE's own best practices for rigorous standards-based education.

The publication of *Taking Center Stage* and the strong collaborative partnerships of the CDE, the California League of Middle Schools, the Association for California School Administrators, and the California Middle Grades Partnership Network resulted in California being selected as one of three states to pilot the national Schools To Watch program. The Schools to Watch program was developed by the National Forum to Accelerate Middle Grades Reform (MG Forum) and grew from the MG Forum's vision of what high-performing middle schools should look like. This vision was derived from some of the original middle grades documents and current research. Information about the MG Forum is available at www.mgforum.org.

Alignment of Major Publications and Programs

After two decades of practice, publications, programs, and research building on one another, the concepts and strategies used have become inextricably interwoven. While more similar than dissimilar in purpose and intent, each of the middle grade documents is grouped differently, and direct parallels are sometimes difficult to draw. Nevertheless, this issue of the *Middle Grades Spotlight* tries to highlight, where possible, the practices of six reporting schools that emulate one or

(Continued from page 3)

- **Assessment and evaluation programs that promote quality learning.**

Continuous, authentic, and appropriate assessment and evaluation measures provide evidence about every student's learning progress. Grades alone are inadequate expressions for assessing the many goals of middle level education.

- **Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning.**

The interdisciplinary team of two to four teachers working with a common group of students is the building block for a strong learning community with its sense of family, where students and teachers know one another well, feel safe and supported, and are encouraged to take intellectual risks.

- **School-wide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety.**

A school that fosters physical and psychological safety strives to build resiliency in young people by maintaining an environment in which peaceful and safe interactions are expected and supported by written policies, scheduled professional development, and focused activities.

- **Multifaceted guidance and support services.**

Developmentally responsive middle level schools provide both teachers and specialized professionals who are readily available to offer the assistance many students need in negotiating their lives both in and out of school.

Source

This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents, A Summary of a Position Paper. National Middle School Association, (2003).
http://www.nmsa.org/news/Executive_Sum.pdf

more of the successful middle school characteristics. Strength and confidence is evident in the growing body of research and in the number of schools building their success on the practice of the principles contained in these documents.

Share Your Middle School Stories

If you are an administrator at a California middle school, you are invited to focus on a specific recommendation, belief, practice, or characteristic from *Taking Center Stage*, *Turning Points* (2000), *This We Believe* (2003) or Schools to Watch program criteria. The Schools to Watch–Taking Center Stage program criteria can be seen on the Web at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/gs/documents/criteria.pdf>.

Please submit your 500-word description of how a practical application from one of these recommendations has improved your school and the student achievement of your young adolescents. Be sure to cite the recommendation and source. All submissions will be considered for future publications, and your school could be featured in an upcoming issue of the *Middle Grades Spotlight!* Submit your description by e-mail to Midnet@cde.ca.gov and include in the subject line: Attention – MG Spotlight.

Works Cited

- Jackson, Anthony W. and Gayle A. Davis. *Turning Points 2000: Educating Adolescents in the 21st Century*. New York: Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2000.
- *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe*. Westerville: Research Committee, National Middle School Association, 2003.
- *Taking Center Stage: A Commitment to Standards-Based Education for California's Middle Grades Students*. Sacramento: Middle Grades and High School Networks Office, California Department of Education, 2001.
- *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents: A Position Paper of the National Middle School Association*. Westerville, Ohio: National Middle School Association, 2003.



Dartmouth Middle School

Union Elementary School District

San Jose, California

Carole E. Carlson, Principal

► **Multiple learning and teaching approaches that respond to their diversity**

► **Organizational structures that support meaningful relationships and learning**

—*This We Believe* (2003)

2003 School Profile

763 students	3% African American
(9% mobility)	5% English learners
72% White	12% Free / reduced meals
13% Hispanic	819 API (up +10 points)
10% Asian	

~ One of California's 1999 Distinguished Schools ~

Dartmouth Middle School adamantly believes that grouping students into interdisciplinary teams provides the architecture to appropriately address the developmental and academic needs of adolescents. Strong multidisciplinary learning teams meet regularly to design curriculum that is engaging and, whenever possible, cross-curricular. Showcase events, such as the sixth grade "Egypt Night," allow students to integrate mathematics and science (e.g., archeological dig), language arts (e.g., drama, writings, travel brochures, and research papers), and art (e.g., pyramids, dolls, jewelry, and mummified chickens) within the broad context of the sixth grade social studies curriculum.

The Rube Goldberg Project, in which eighth grade teams of students use five simple machines to build a contraption that gets a ball bearing from point A to point B, is another example of this kind of instruction. A research paper describing the process, a group oral report, and an evening presentation for the community complete this assignment and allow students to take principles of physics and turn them into a creative, collegial group project. This type of project offers continuous opportunities for interaction with peers and the instructor and accommodates the diverse skills and abilities of each student.

The teaming structure, with allocated planning time for staff, allows teams to bond with their students and understand their learning styles. Collegial, interdisciplinary planning contributes to the creation of relevant instruction for students. Whether a project is designing mathematical folktales, training student speakers to teach the law, sharing social studies projects with younger students, preparing PowerPoint presentations to teach concepts, studying medieval times through writing stories, creating castles, or studying the "cosmos" of a moat, interdisciplinary planning enhances student engagement and, thereby, increases learning.

For information on campus events, go to <http://www.unionsd.k12.ca.us/dartmouth/>.

By Carole E. Carlson, Principal, Dartmouth Middle School, (408) 264-1122,
carlsonc@unionsd.org

Dartmouth Middle School, continued

► **Recommendation 1: Implement rigorous and consistent standards while maintaining a dynamic student-centered culture.**

► **Recommendation 3: Demonstrate commitment to essential elements of the middle grades philosophy.**

— *Taking Center Stage* (2001)

► **Use instructional methods designed to prepare all students to achieve higher standards and become lifelong learners.**

► **Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.**

— *Turning Points* (2000)



Fillmore Middle School

Fillmore Unified School District

Fillmore, California

Tricia Gradias, Principal

► **High expectations for every member of the learning community**

— *This We Believe* (2003)

2003 School Profile

888 students
(10% mobility)
77% Hispanic
20% White

36% English learners
58% Free / reduced meals
642 API (up +42 points)

When you enter the main office of Fillmore Middle School, you will see a big banner that reads, "Fillmore Middle School: The Best Students in the World Are Learning Here." This is an example of the "can do/no excuses" attitude that we possess at our school. In my four years as site administrator, I have seen Fillmore Middle School evolve into a place where all staff share a common vision that our student can and will learn. We believe that

Fillmore Middle School, continued

education is an exciting and rewarding vocation. What other vocation can have so much influence on the generations to follow? On the other hand, we understand and recognize that much is required from those who accept the calling.

With commitments so strong and so much at stake, we have made attitude and program changes so that the systems in place and the methods used support the primary mission of all schools: to promote student learning. Although several after-school tutorials and interventions classes are in place, we have seen the need to provide tutorials and interventions during the regular school day so that students do not have to choose between going to football practice or attending an after-school intervention. As a result of providing tutorials during the school day, the sacrifice of cutting way back on elective offerings had to be made. We are able to provide all of our 300 or more English Language Development (ELD) students with a period of ELD instruction in place of their elective. In addition, we have math and reading tutorials for underperforming students.

Data driven information and criteria are the core of all decisions made in our academic program. We have the wonderful technological support of Edusoft, purchased by our district, which contains necessary data on our students so that informed decisions are at our fingertips. Many academic gains have been made as a result of our continuous data analysis and the setting of quarterly student performance goals and targets on the basis of student performance data. The credit to our continuous academic gains must be given to our bold, caring, and committed teachers and support staff as well as the ongoing support from our district administrative team. We are a family of educators who are extremely supportive; yet we are willing to challenge one another to never settle for mediocrity. We celebrate our successes while continuously working to establish a motivational climate in which every student feels safe to work with diligence, to tackle new learning opportunities, and to learn from his or her mistakes.

By Tricia Gradias, Principal, Fillmore Middle School

► **Recommendation 11: Hold all stakeholders accountable for high academic and behavioral expectations.**

— *Taking Center Stage (2001)*

► **Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.**

► **Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.**

— *Turning Points (2000)*



Ruth Musser Middle School

Central Elementary School District

Rancho Cucamonga, California

David Soden, Principal

► Educators who value working with this age group and are prepared to do so.

—*This We Believe* (2003)

2003 School Profile

1003 students	4% Asian
(30% mobility)	5% English learners
41% White	26% Free /reduced meals
33% Hispanic	760 API (up +33 points)
15% African American	

At Ruth Musser Middle School, we have educators who value working with the middle school age group and are prepared to do so. The staff consists of 41 fully credentialed teachers, many who have a background in elementary education. Six of our teachers have received National Board Certification in Early Adolescence, English Language Arts.

Our language arts and social studies program consists of a three-period block in a seven-period day. The majority of our students are also placed in a math and science core. This approach allows our students to have uninterrupted effective learning time with one teacher. This schedule allows for flexibility within the learning blocks when planning lessons.

Planning is also facilitated by a common preparation time for teachers by grade level or subject matter, allowing for consistency in curriculum and assessment strategies. All students are assessed in math and language arts on an ongoing basis. Assessment results are recorded in folders for each student and indicate his or her level of performance. These folders follow the student from year to year. The underperforming students are assessed and given individualized learning plans.

The Central School District provides us with three staff development days a year. Teacher input is considered in planning these days.

By David Soden, Principal, Ruth Musser Middle School

► **Recommendation 7: Examine the use of time to provide students and teachers opportunities to plan, integrate, teach, and learn.**

► **Recommendation 13: Provide relevant and appropriate school-based, comprehensive, ongoing professional development.**

— *Taking Center Stage* (2001)

► **Staff middle grades schools with teachers who are expert at teaching young adolescents and engage teachers in ongoing, targeted professional development opportunities.**

► **Organize relationships for learning to create a climate of intellectual development and a caring community of shared educational purpose.**

— *Turning Points* (2000)



Sierra Vista Middle School

Irvine Unified School District
Irvine, California
Beverley Khalil-White, Principal

► **School-initiated family and community partnerships.**

—*This We Believe* (2003)

2003 School Profile

850 students	2% Filipino
(10% mobility)	7% English learners
54% White	6% Free / reduced meals
35% Asian	878 API (up +29 points)
5% Hispanic	

At Sierra Vista Middle School, we believe positive home-to-school bonds are critical to learning. Consequently, we begin building partnerships before students arrive as seventh graders by holding a spring parent night to discuss curriculum and middle school life, inviting families to observe learning and to meet the staff at Open House, offering invitations to the principal's coffees, and organizing a tour for the incoming students. Families return for registration activities in August, and on the first day of school, students meet the advisers who will conference with their families in the fall and advocate for the students throughout the year.

We also ensure partnerships through multiple communication links: individual teacher e-mail and voice mail; Blackboard (which allows posting assignments and grades online); the school Web page at <http://sierravistams.org>; individual teacher Web pages; mailed newsletters; progress and report cards; an electronic ParentPortal for parents to check transcripts; and a mass communication telephone system to advertise important events. These links help ensure that every family is well informed. The links also assist in developing strong partnerships between home and school. We also offer parents English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes on-site and systematically invite small groups of parents to parent education coffees. The result is a community that values our school and school staff who reciprocate those values.

By Beverley Khalil-White, Principal, Sierra Vista Middle School

► **Recommendation 14: Engage families and the community to support student achievement.**

— *Taking Center Stage* (2001)

► **Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and healthy development.**

— *Turning Points* (2000)



Summit Intermediate School

Etiwanda Elementary School District

Etiwanda, California

Lori Arita, Principal

► **An inviting, supportive, and safe environment.**

► **An adult advocate for every student.**

—*This We Believe* (2003)

2003 School Profile

1403 students	6% Asian
(33% mobility)	4% Filipino
47% White	1% English learners
27% Hispanic	10% Free / reduced meals
14% African American	766 API (up +23 points)

~ One of California's 1999 Distinguished Schools ~

At Summit Intermediate, a California Distinguished School, we are all about P.R.I.D.E.! We are committed to helping our students and staff attain “Personal Responsibility In Developing Excellence.” Through our 30-minute PRIDE period, we are able to develop a personal relationship with every student. This advisement period involves having students return to their homeroom teacher every day. Activities during PRIDE include roundtable discussions, team building activities, and participation in our schoolwide character education program.

Student Ambassadors assume the responsibility of promoting school spirit. These ambassadors of spirit organize and implement weekly lunchtime activities; assist our volunteers with Renaissance, our schoolwide student recognition program; and help to ensure that student voices are heard. Our exploratory and flexible classes provide the chance for our students to pursue their interests in other areas.

Along with promoting a supportive and energetic environment for students, we also strive to ensure that our staff is motivated and appreciated. Every Friday we highlight the week's events and achievements of our staff in our *Friday Focus* newsletter. Shared planning time provides the much-needed opportunity for collaboration. Twice each month we host a staff development “Professional Hour” for the staff. At this meeting, our own teachers share their expertise in a broad variety of areas from participating in GATE activities to motivating their students. Participation is optional, yet there is never an empty seat. The administrative team takes each teacher around for a “Walk and Talk” session to share ideas, visit other classrooms, and to deliver hot chocolate to teachers on duty on those chilly mornings!

By Lori Arita, Principal, Summit Intermediate School

► **Recommendation 3: Demonstrate commitment to essential elements of the middle grades philosophy.**

— *Taking Center Stage* (2001)

► **Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens.**

— *Turning Points* (2000)



Suva Intermediate School

Montebello Unified School District

Bell Gardens, California

Glenda Golobay, Principal

► Schoolwide efforts and policies that foster health, wellness and safety.

► Multifaceted guidance and support services.

—*This We Believe* (2003)

2003 School Profile

1636 students
(64% mobility)

97% Hispanic
2% White

58% English learners
100% Free / reduced meals
532 API (up +24 points)

Suva Intermediate School is an urban fifth grade through eighth grade comprehensive school characterized by a network of highly skilled professionals who support the academic and personal development of all students.

A major step in our change process has been the implementation of our Results Based Guidance program. It provides a positive learning environment that fosters student success. In addition to an academic emphasis, our programs encourage students to cooperate, communicate, attend school regularly, and take pride in their school.

Community professionals include physicians who staff our onsite medical clinic, two full-time therapists who provide individual and family counseling, and an onsite Boys and Girls Club that provides after-school care and academic tutoring.

Pride is the outcome of our efforts. The attendance rate has increased consistently to our current rate of 97.43 percent, and suspensions have decreased by more than 50 percent. All of our club advisers and coaches are Suva staff members. Three hundred and fifty seven students participate in our instrumental music program, and 500 students participate in after-school sports. Over 700 people attended our Back-to-School Night, and more than 1,000 people attended our annual Learning Faire that showcased student work. We truly celebrate learning!

By Glenda Golobay, Principal, Montebello Unified School District,
golobay_glenda@montebello.k12.ca.us

► Recommendation 3: Demonstrate commitment to essential elements of the middle grades philosophy.

► Recommendation 16: Provide access to health and social services to maximize student well-being.

— *Taking Center Stage* (2001)

► Provide a safe and healthy school environment as part of improving academic performance and developing caring and ethical citizens.

► Involve parents and communities in supporting student learning and health development.

— *Turning Points* (2000)

Resources & News

- ***This We Believe – 2003 Edition***

The National Middle School Association released the third edition of its landmark document, *This We Believe: Successful Schools for Young Adolescents* last November. The position paper provides a vision for successful middle schools and delineates 14 characteristics that, when presented over time, lead to higher levels of student achievement. A companion document, *Research and Resources in Support of This We Believe*, brings together research studies and related resources that support sound educational practices for young adolescents. Visit <http://nmsa.org/> to view the executive summary.

- ***Schools to Watch – Taking Center Stage Alignment Guide***

The Middle Grades and High School Improvement Office has produced a side-by-side comparison of the Schools to Watch program criteria with the key elements found in *Taking Center Stage*. Contact midnet@cde.ca.gov to request a copy.

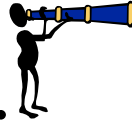
- ***Physical Activity Guidelines — Revised***

The National Association for Sport & Physical Activity announced the release of its revised physical activity guidelines, *Physical Activity for Children: A Statement of Guidelines for Children Ages 5–12*. The document provides guidelines for parents, physicians, physical education teachers, classroom teachers, youth physical activity leaders, school administrators, and all others dedicated to promoting physically active lifestyles for children. To view the press release on the Web, go to http://www.aahperd.org/naspe/template.cfm?template=pr_123103.html.

- ***California's 2004 Model Middle Schools — Announcement***

State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O'Connell announced the names of the three middle schools designated as the 2004 California's Schools to Watch – Taking Center Stage program models. These schools represent examples of high-performing middle schools that are academically excellent, developmentally responsive, socially equitable, and organized to sustain dynamic improvement and reform. Designated schools will serve as models for other schools to visit, learn from, and emulate. A virtual tour of the four 2003 schools is available at <http://www.clms.net/>. The virtual tour will be expanded in the coming months to include the three 2004 designees. View the Superintendent's press release at <http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/nr/nr/yr04re/15.asp>.

Looking Ahead...



Year 2004

- March 23-24 Association of California School Administrators (ACSA)
Secondary Literacy Summit IV—Beyond Conversation to System-
Wide Implementation
Hilton Hotel, Arden West
2300 Harvard Street, Sacramento, California
<http://www.acsa.org/events/>
- April 1-2 CA Middle Grades Partnership Network (CMGPN)
Quarterly Meeting
Woodfin Suite Hotel--San Francisco Bay Bridge
5800 Shellmound Street, Emeryville, California
Contact Camille A. Smith at casmith@cde.ca.gov.
- April 20-21 On the Right Track 2 Symposium
WestEd and the California Department of Education
The Westin-Los Angeles Airport
Los Angeles, California
Contact Linda Slayton at Lslayton@cde.ca.gov, (916) 319-0833.
- July 6-9 California League of Middle Schools (CLMS)
August 1-3 Summer Literacy Institutes--*Framing Best Practices*
Maui, Hawaii-- July 6-9
Indian Wells, California-- August 1-3
<http://www.clms.net/conferences/summer04.htm>

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